FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
September 16, 2001

ON SINGING THE LORD'S SONG IN A FOREIGN LAND
John M. Buchanan

"There is within us – even the most lighthearted among us – a fundamental dis-ease. It acts like an unquenchable fire that renders the vast majority of us incapable in this life of ever coming to full peace.... All great literature, poetry, art, philosophy, psychology and religion tries to name and analyze this longing. We are seldom in direct touch with it, and indeed the modern world seems set on preventing us from getting in touch with it by covering it with an unending phantasmorgia of entertainments, obsessions, addictions, and distractions of every sort. But the longing is built into us...."

Huston Smith
Why Religion Matters, The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief

FOURTH
PRESBY
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CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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ON SINGING THE LORD'S SONG IN A FOREIGN LAND
September 16, 2001

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 137:1-6

"How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"
Psalm 137:4 (NRSV)

Dear God, our losses this week are larger than we have words with which to describe them, and our feelings—our grief and anger and compassion and love—are larger than we can say. But you know us, O Lord; you know our hearts. And so we come before you in gratitude. Speak the word that you have for us today, and as we stumble under the load, strengthen us with your love in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept.
. . .
How can we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?

That is how it has been since shortly after 8:45 Tuesday morning.

I used to love the sight—approaching LaGuardia, descending across New York harbor, the Statue of Liberty, Battery Park at the tip of Manhattan, and those two gleaming white towers. They represented our contribution to the skyline, the nation's front door; they represented our optimism, our confidence. We visited for the breathtaking view and ate dinner looking out through what we came to know as Windows on the World. For as long as we live, we will not forget the sight of them, and we will not forget the literally unbelievable sight of their destruction. And then, the Pentagon, symbol of our might and invincibility. And the plane, headed towards Washington, down in the Pennsylvania hills.

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept.
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How can we sing the Lord's song
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It is a different land this Sunday than it was last week. Our first response was disbelief. As I watched, I struggled with my innate unwillingness to accept what I was seeing. Perhaps it was a small plane, off course. The damage can be repaired. We can make this right—we're Americans. Even after a second hit—we can shrug this off, patch it up, and go on.

Then they came down, and disbelief became anger for this personal, obscene assault. Our impulse was to strike out, to punish someone, anyone. And among the most important contributions people of faith can make to the national conversation going on at so many levels is to resist that human impulse and to model something of the centuries of wisdom that is our religious tradition. Revenge and retaliation to make a point may be very popular and tempting politically, but they do not work: they do not accomplish their intended objectives. And they are wrong. Muslim people in this nation and throughout the world have already begun to feel the pain of suspicion and hostility. This was not an Islamic gesture. Our duty as Christians is to acknowledge that, say it, and reach out to Muslim individuals and communities. To demand revenge, mindless retaliation, is to give a great victory to those who have done this thing, and that might be the greatest tragedy of all. Of course we must discover who did this. Of course we must do what is necessary to assure the safety and security of people who live in a free society. But we must not abandon, in the process, our most precious ideals and purposes: freedom, justice for all, and the rule of law.

Whoever did this assumed, perhaps, that when we experienced this violence, this demonstration of the vulnerability of a free society, we would be humiliated, discouraged. In fact, what has resulted is a renewed sense of our unity as a nation and our unity with the community of nations. People didn't cower in fear; they volunteered to help, gave blood, sent money, called loved ones and friends, lit candles and stood vigil along darkened streets, and went to church.

We received hundreds of messages from members and friends of Fourth Presbyterian Church simply wanting to connect, to affirm a sense of belonging and being together.

We received messages from around the world, reminders that we are part of a global community.

> From Mitri Raheb, Palestinian pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, who wanted Americans to know that pictures of Palestinians celebrating and dancing in the streets, shown on American television, were an aberration and in no way representative of the Palestinian people, who were shocked and saddened.
>
> From the Bishop of the Reformed Church in Croatia, conveying deepest sympathy and prayers.
>
> From the Presbytery of Havana.
>
> From the American Muslim Council, condemning vicious acts of terrorism and expressing deep sorrow at the loss of American lives.
>
> And who will ever forget the Royal Military Band playing our national anthem at Buckingham Palace or our Canadian neighbors in worship?

These days have reminded us of our humanness, our belonging to the human family. They have reminded us of the precious gift of community, of nation. The events last Tuesday have reminded us that no nation is entirely autonomous any longer and that, whether we want to be or

not, we are part of the family of nations, and races, and religions. We need neighbors now. The fight against terrorism cannot be conducted unilaterally. We can no longer act internationally on the basis of self-interest. We can no longer afford to walk away from international treaties and conferences and negotiations.

And the tragedy has raised the deepest most profound questions of all: Why has this happened? Clergy were asked that a lot last week, frequently by young reporters looking for a story, looking, I assume, for someone who would say that God had a hand in it; that we suffer as punishment for our wrongdoing; or that God arranged this to teach us something; or that God allowed it—which is what Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, with appalling insensitivity and a gross misrepresentation of the Christian faith, said last week. God did not do this. God did not intend this. This tragedy, as is the case with all tragedy and human loss, happens in a world God loves so much that God created it in freedom. God doesn't cause human suffering; God participates in it, experiences it with us. God had a son whose life was cut off prematurely, violently, cruelly. Basic Christian belief—that in Jesus Christ God lived our life, shared our humanity, and died our death—rests on the firm foundation of the Hebrew conviction so eloquently expressed by the psalmist:

> The Lord is my shepherd,
> I shall not want.
> Even though I walk through the
> valley of the shadow of death,
> I will fear no evil;
> For thou art with me;
> Thy rod and thy staff—
> They comfort me.

That is the promise and the foundation of our faith.

Part of the experience of all of us this week is dislocation. We have a sense that we live in a different country this morning, and we're feeling sad and lost, homesick for the one we used to live in.

We know personally the psalmist's lament:

> By the rivers of Babylon—
> there we sat down and there we wept.
> . . .
> How can we sing the Lord's song
> in a foreign land?

Nicholas Wolterstorff, professor of philosophy at Yale, lost a son in a mountain climbing accident and wrote a beautiful book about his resulting experience, *Lament for a Son.*

"My attachment is loosened," he observed. "I've become alien in the world. I don't belong any more" (p. 51).

That is the experience of Israel, our ancestors in the faith. Violently and cruelly deported from their homes and resettled in Babylon, in exile, they longed to go home. That is the situation that prompted the writing of the 137th psalm, which we read this morning. Homesickness.

It is an elegant poem. It touches me every time I read it. It makes me think of home—the home I left, the home we all left once upon a time. It reminds me of the occasions of my own homesickness. It makes me think of what home means now and how precious that is. Among the e-mails I received last week was one from a friend stranded in Brussels. "I feel like I'm in exile," she wrote. "I'm frightened and I want to come home."

But there's a big problem with that psalm. When we read it in worship, we always stop at verse 6, because what comes next is chilling:

> O daughter of Babylon, you devastator!
> Happy shall they be who pay you back. . . .
> . . . who take your little ones
> and dash them against the rocks!

It's not one of the more noble moments in the Bible. But before we dismiss it as an unfaithful and sinful outburst, consider its passion, its honesty, its relevance to what we have felt this week, its authenticity.

We know the process of grief: how loss, any loss, leads to numbness, then to an awareness of the enormous reality of the loss, and then to anger. We know that anger is both inevitable and necessary as we come to terms with and work our way through grief. When we lose a loved one, we want to blame someone, get angry with someone: the doctors, the doctors didn't diagnose properly or treat thoroughly; or the nurses weren't paying attention; or the minister didn't call enough; or I should have done more, should have seen the signs earlier; or God, God did this or allowed this. It is part of the experience of loss, so transparently part of the psalm writer's experience as well as our own. And it's in the Bible, but not as a strategy—there is no indication that the psalmist put his words into action or suggested that anyone else do it. What he did was offer his grief and his terrible anger to God. What he did was come to God in utter honesty, in a moment of terrible loss and profound grief. It is an invitation for us today to do the same: to offer up to God all the trauma and tears, the grief, the rage, we have experienced this week.

Part of the resource of our faith as Christians is the promise of homecoming when we are lost, or separated, or exiled. And insofar as the violent and tragic events of last Tuesday have put all of us in a new and different place, that promise is God's good and healing word for us this day.

I went back this week, partly to find comfort for my own soul, to one of my favorite authors, Frederich Buechner. When Buechner was a little boy, his world changed utterly and dramatically and traumatically one Saturday morning when his father committed suicide. With grace and courage, Buechner has written eloquently about that trauma and how it forever changed his world, how it brought to an end what he knew as home and forced him to a lifetime of thinking about that in the context of his Christian faith.

In a recent book, *Eyes of the Heart*, he tells about sitting in church on Easter and hearing the minister ask from the pulpit "if there were any of us there who weren't ashamed of our lives, and I wanted to hurl him bodily out of his pulpit." "The Church", Buechner says with angry impatience, "only remembers the story of sin and shame and the religious life as a story of guilt and sacrifice and forgiveness." There is another biblical story that isn't heard much, Buechner says. It's the story of exile. "Why not ask us," he asks, "if there are any of us who do not feel the sadness and loneliness and lostness of being separated from where we know in our hearts we truly belong, even if we're not sure where it is to be found or how to get there, if there are any of us who do not yearn, more than for anything else, to go home" (pp. 75-76).

Jesus told three remarkable little stories once about coming home, about reunion, about being found by God. Religious people, Pharisees and scribes, had been complaining about the way Jesus welcomed sinners and unclean people, people of the wrong religion or no religion, marginalized, outcast people, as friends; how he ate with them, seemed actually to like them, seemed actually to prefer their company to the company of the proper, orthodox, morally pure religious zealots.

So Jesus told stories about a shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep to find one sheep who has wandered away and is lost and who, when he finds it, lifts it to his strong shoulders and carries it home and invites the neighbors in to celebrate. And he told about a woman who loses one coin and lights her lamps and turns her house inside out and won't stop searching until she finds that coin, and when she does, she invites her friends to join her in celebration.

The third story is about a son who leaves home, wastes his money, returns home in great trepidation, and is welcomed by a father who runs down the road to meet him and throws open his arms and won't even let him apologize.

Stunning pictures of God: not a stern judge, counting sins, meting out punishment for wrongdoing, wrong believing, but a shepherd finding a lost sheep and a woman searching until she finds one coin, a father running down the road to welcome home a lost child.

And it is a stunning picture of religion, not a relentless striving for theological correctness or moral purity, but a homecoming, a being found and claimed and embraced by God's amazing love.

And it is a good and powerful word for us this morning trying to think and pray our way through this tragedy, this loss, this sense that we may have lost our home.

In God's love we are home.

Good friend and eloquent poet Barrie Shepherd wrote:

> Love is the way, the only way to life
> and the longer I neglect it,
> the longer I will weep
> for a land that is my home even
> though I never knew it.
>
> This is the longing that yearns within the
> heart
> of all your people, Lord, the longing
> for love.
> The promise up ahead of a land and
> of a time
> when your children will breath free,
> will eat well,
> will grow strong, will know love. (*Praying the Psalms,* p. 121)

We live in a new place this morning. But our true home, our final home is in the love of God.

May we commend to God's love all that has happened this week:

those who have perished

those whose grief is profound

those who work to relieve suffering and minister to the suffering and dying

those who must lead us into the future

May we today commend to the love of God our own lives and our dear country, commend it all to the God who is our home.

Amen.

Prayers of the People
By Dana Ferguson, Associate Pastor for Mission

O God, our strength in ages past, our hope for years to come, we lift our eyes to devastation and destruction. And we ask, from whence shall our help come? O God, comfort of the comfortless, hope of the hopeless, we beseech you. Make your voice ring in our ears and echo in the empty places of our soul. Say to us and to this nation, our help comes from you. For you alone can satisfy all of our longings that earth cannot.

As Jesus wept over Jerusalem, we weep for our cities, for New York and D.C. Grant us courage, we pray, for the facing of this hour. We call ourselves the resurrection people, but we seem more the companions of death, more the friends of loss than life. Grant us courage as we join our voices with those who shout out in despair and disbelief; as we wait with those who wait in darkness and in dust; as we hope with those who hope and grieve with those who grieve. We grieve for lives lost—for mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, children and cousins, siblings and friends. And we grieve for that which was lost and shall never be again—for innocence dashed away; for the sense of goodness and security shattered before us; for the belief that such evil does not exist tumbled to the ground.

Remind us that though the landscape of this nation has changed forever, you have not. You are the same from generation to generation. You are goodness and grace, compassion and consolation, hope and healing. And so draw us to the well of faith that sustained generations through all times—through famine and warfare, terror and trauma, vengeance and violence. Let us see beyond these cities of our dwelling to the city of your dwelling. Put before us a clear picture of your grace that inhabits the streets of New York and the corners of this nation; your love that comes through rescuers and health care providers, through neighbors and strangers, an open door, a hand outstretched, a prayer uttered.

Remind us, too, of the goodness and innocence still held in the hearts of the young. Make us stronger to lead them still to build a world full of love and compassion, hope and promise. Let us tell the stories of goodness and giving so that they might not only remember stories of hatred. May they not be shaped only by the broken world they inherit but by the compassion that went ahead of them, that together we might all claim that goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate, light is stronger than darkness, truth is stronger than lies.

We would not pause this day without also remembering those who carry heavy responsibilities. And so we pray for those who continue the recovery efforts and health care, for those whose job it is to return airplanes to our skies, for those whose job it is to bury the dead, for those who lead our cities and our country, for those who labor at the Pentagon and the White House, for military personnel, for President Bush and his administration, for ambassadors and those who govern countries far away.

As we go forth into the future unknown, grant us wisdom, lest we do in the name of those now past, things they would not have us do; lest what we do in the name of justice is simply human vengeance. Remind us, O God, that vengeance does not equal your justice, that who we are is not

dictated by what has been done to us but by what has been done for us. Jesus Christ died not that we might hate but that we might love and serve friends and neighbors, strangers and enemies alike. Remind us, God of grace, that before there were stories of hate, you told the stories of faithfulness; before we asked why, you had already answered all questions in Christ. The journey ahead is different than it ever has been before. Remind us that no matter what road we travel, there you will be, just as you were on the road to Emmaus, waiting to be recognized, willing to come in and be with us. Be our keeper; enshroud our life with your love. Let your eye watch over our going out and our coming in. Let your arm ever stretch toward us and your everlasting light lead us forward from this time forth and forevermore. Amen.

Prayers of the People
By John H. Boyle, Parish Associate

Eternal God, when we give thanks to you, as we do now, for your good gift of life, we do so with a much greater awareness of the significance of what we might be otherwise inclined to utter somewhat glibly. For we have been reminded with devastating clarity how fragile and tentative and temporary life is at any given moment in time. And we have seen once more how what we all but worship as icons of permanence and stability in our world can be reduced to dust and ashes in the twinkling of an eye. In addition to the lives and properties that have been shattered, our illusions have been shattered as well, and we feel adrift.

In the wake of the catastrophic events of recent days, we hesitate to invoke references to your goodness as never failing or to your mercy as being from everlasting to everlasting. Such references stick in our throats, choke our voices, and sound like so many meaningless platitudes at a time when our senses are bombarded with vivid images of blood and carnage and when the sounds of violence and destruction—and then the sound of deathly silence—all but drown out the cries of mercy that erupt from the wounded and dying and from those crushed under the weight of unbearable sorrow.

What we want to do, O God, is to replace platitudes of reassurance with powerful acts of retribution and revenge. What we want to do is to bomb somebody off the face of the earth—anybody, and anybody we think looks like anybody who would dare to violate us in such an horrendous way. What we want to do is to reclaim our potency and to show the world and our particular and perceived enemies in the world that we can outdo anyone when it comes to unleashing the power of our outrage over what has been done to us.

That's what we want to do, O God, if we are honest with you; and we must be honest with you, even if we cannot be honest with ourselves. Forgive us for even thinking that way, however understandable it might be for us to do so. It is because we believe that you do understand how we might think that way that we can tell you what you already know about us without fear of your retribution and with openness to your healing grace.

Save us, loving God, from becoming what our best selves abhor. We have witnessed the power of madness. Deliver us from the madness of power, lest we discover finally how thin the line is sometimes between the monster within us and the monster within those from whom we think we are so very different. And keep us, we pray, from being so bound by no purpose other than our own profit and so untroubled by the nuisance of a conscience that we feel neither the pangs of hunger nor the pain of death that make up the lot of multitudes in the world.

Gracious God, through your Word made flesh in Jesus Christ you teach us that nothing in life or in death and devastation is able to separate us from your love. Look in mercy upon all to whom great sorrow has come. Bring healing to the injured and courage to the dying. Sustain and strengthen all who are giving of themselves to the fullest in efforts at rescue and relocation. And to those who have lost loved ones and friends, bring them comfort and consolation of your presence. For all the evidences of compassion, care, and for the heroic action on the part of so many, we give you thanks, O God.

Bless our president and all leaders of government at all levels within our nation as they seek to determine how we shall relate and respond to the terror that has been unleashed upon us and upon your world.

We praise you for the diversity of faith among the people of the earth and for the grace that you have bestowed upon Christians and Jews and Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus and upon all who in ways unique to them celebrate your love, your mercy, and your forgiving grace and who seek to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with you. Help us to relate to all people in the spirit of that grace.

And when, dear God, we grow weary of trying to make sense of that which seems to make no sense and of trying to find answers to what seems unanswerable and when we are left with little else than our doubt and our sadness, help us somehow to remember that earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal.

In the name of the risen Christ, we pray. Amen.